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# Race-ing Sex

NAYAN SHAH

The history of sexuality in the United States is inextricably bound to the history of racialization. Conquest, slavery, voluntary migration, segregation, exclusion, stratification, detention, and civil rights struggles have shaped erotics, reproduction, identity, and kinship across four centuries. In the third edition of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman acknowledge in a new afterword entitled "Recent Historical Literature" that "attention to race difference and race relations is one of the most important ways in which history of sexuality has extended its scope."<sup>1</sup> Attention to race both extends the history of sexuality's scope and challenges its analysis.

Since its publication in 1988 *Intimate Matters* has offered a remarkably durable synthetic framework that shapes research investigations into the US history of sexuality, reproduction, and kinship. Freedman and D'Emilio present a three-pronged structure of historical analysis. The first tracks sexual meanings over time, geography, and social context. The second analyzes the continuities and changes in systems of sexual regulation in law, morality, and society that "channeled sexual desire and relations, criminalized and rendered some illegitimate and buttressed and enforced sexual norms by elites and experts." The third details dynamics of sexual politics generated through "struggles among different classes, races and genders to contest sexual and social orders."<sup>2</sup> This framework shaped my preparation for my PhD orals examination in US social history and the interpretive spine of the "race and sexual politics" and the "history of sexuality" courses I teach undergraduates.

Since the publication of *Intimate Matters* twenty-five years ago, among the dramatic developments in the field is the profusion of scholarship and research questions addressing race, sexuality, and gender. The tremendous growth in Asian American history is just one arena in which the process of racialization has unsettled both popular and scholarly assumptions about the

shaping of sexual and social orders. In the original edition of *Intimate Matters* the handful of references to Asian American historical experience were limited to Chinese and Japanese female prostitution in the late nineteenth century and Chinese male bachelor society. Up until the 1980s Asian American history skirted a direct engagement with the questions and concerns of the history of sexuality. Likewise, history of sexuality scholars mirrored the approach of the social history of immigration, which viewed Asian American historical experience as curious and exceptional, but not a challenge to the field's paradigms or analysis.

Since the 1990s Asian American studies scholars have analyzed and explained the combined racialization and sexualization of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans that have defined Asians persistently as irreducibly alien and inassimilable to the US nation-state and American culture. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Chinese and Japanese American men and women were depicted as depraved, immoral, and racially inassimilable to US society.<sup>3</sup> US immigration restrictions, labor migration, and recruitment patterns contributed to predominantly male Chinese, South Asian, and Filipino migration. This "bachelor society," with its lopsided gender ratios, has been cast as a tragedy of sexual and social alienation. Historians have critically interpreted the lurid and sensationalist imagery of Asian American bachelor vice to understand broader patterns of sexualized and gendered race-making that buttressed racial antipathy and segregation. The racial caricatures that circulate in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century media of effeminate men, treacherous women, and subservient women reinforced the perception of the "Oriental" race as gender atypical and sexually nonnormative, bereft of sexual agency.<sup>4</sup>

This new research that combines an attention to racialization and sexualization has transformed attention to racialized regimes of migration and transnational family formation; interracial socialization and erotics; the state management of heterosexuality through race; and the sexual agency, feeling, and politics of individual life stories and community struggles.

The concept of a "bachelor" society of single and independent men was a misnomer that ignored marriages and children in natal communities in Asia. Trans-Pacific migration separated families and reorganized kinship systems, and, as Jennifer Ting astutely recognized, narratives of family separation and reunification, managed by the state, became central to the history of sexuality from an Asian American perspective. The transformation of gender expression and roles and sexual subjectivities was nurtured by long-term separation of married couples, women-centered households in emigrant-sending communities, and male-dominant labor settlements in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Transnational marriage and kinship systems were sustained by technologies

of long-distance communication and moral regulation through mutual aid associations, religious societies, and missionaries. New scholarship has focused on the strategies of circular global migration that timed return visits to village homes strategically and concentrated child-rearing responsibilities on parents, wives, and siblings in joint-family households.<sup>6</sup> The circumscribed territorial boundary of the United States is also giving way to a more fluid and flexible approach to the transnational impact. New studies have begun to assess the sexual, emotional, and social experiences of the “stranded” wives.

In North America commercial entertainment and urban-rural migrant-labor circulation fostered a variety of intensive, transitory, and flexible interracial encounters and relationships through homosocial bunking and boarding houses, opium dens, gambling houses, and restaurants and through heterosocial dating culture, including taxi-dance halls and the new urban amusements of cafes, cinemas, and arcades. Filipino men's participation in taxi-dance-hall culture and the social and political consequences have been the focal point for a rich array of studies of race, gender performance, romance, and working-class heterosocial cultures.<sup>7</sup> As Judy Wu accounts, the “compulsory condition of ‘deviance’ among the early generation of Asian Americans” indexes more than “racial victimization” but also opens the terrain for analyzing the “opportunity for non-normative sexual exploration” and how cultural representations of “Oriental” exoticism and vice “encouraged experimentation and attraction across racial boundaries.”<sup>8</sup> The spaces, institutions, and practices that sustained the social dynamics of mixing and nonnormative sexualities emerge through the different kinds of “queer domesticity” that counter, contest, upset, and challenge normative expectations and practices. Notwithstanding the alternative socialities generated, these queer domesticities and erotics also trafficked in a complex array of gender, class, age, and race hierarchies and disparities.<sup>9</sup>

The attention to “deviant heterosexuality” in the relationships among Chinese female prostitutes, diverse male clients, Chinatown merchants, and pimps assists in our understanding of how the project of moral reform led by Protestant White women-led missionary groups fashions normative heterosexuality and rehabilitation of respectable, educated, and Christianized Chinese women.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, Mary Liu's exploration of the unsolved murder of an elite White young New York woman and the manhunt for a dapper Chinese American murder suspect underlined the possibilities of interracial heterosexual attraction.<sup>11</sup> This research contributes to how the organization of “normative heterosexuality” depends on complex and intersecting formations of race, class, and religion along with specific classifications of sexual morality, gender performance, and embodiment. Racial power accrued through

the performance and expectations of respectable sexual mores and behavior against images of degeneracy and deviance.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than presuming social isolation and ostracization of Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South Asian migrants, new research has demonstrated that along with expansive streams of labor migration arose new sexual opportunities and community formations in the mid-eighteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. The circulation of South Asian, Chinese, and Filipino sailors globally, the consequence of jumping ship and settlement in port cities and littoral regions, created opportunities for multiracial sociability. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the settlement of Filipino sailors who jumped ship from Spanish galleons and settled in the Louisiana bayou. In the wake of shifts in territorial possession among France, the United States, and Spain and instances of natural disaster, these men's marriages with Creole, French Canadian, Italian, Spanish, Native American, and Black women were made visible, producing a rich social, cultural, and economic legacy in shrimping villages.<sup>13</sup> Jack Tchen's and Mary Liu's books illustrate the opportunities that Chinese men and Irish women in nineteenth-century New York had to court, cohabitate, marry, and have children. This scholarship analyzes both the local conditions of neighborhoods, social networks, and institutions that made interracial courtship possible and the cultural and social cues that shaped erotic attraction and interest despite the intense political and cultural representations that vociferously discouraged them.<sup>14</sup> The emergence of multiracial port cultures and cross-racial sexual and economic alliances has been taken up most recently by Vivek Renjen Bald, who traces the migration of Bengali Muslim sailors and peddlers in the British Empire's trans-Atlantic trade and their marriages with African American and Puerto Rican women in early- and mid-twentieth-century New Orleans, Savannah, Tampa, and New York.<sup>15</sup> The parallel twentieth-century colonial history of Filipino sailors in the US Merchant Marine and the US Navy impacted port cultures on the Pacific coast and the development of Filipino Mexican and European immigrant communities. Drawing on a more contemporary history of Filipino sailors, Kale Farjardo's recent study examines the history of Filipino male and transgender sailors as expressions and embodiments of masculinity.<sup>16</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries capitalist development, labor demands, and political violence and turmoil made the US-Mexico borderlands the grounds of overlapping and circular migration of Mexican, South Asian, Chinese, Black, Japanese, Indigenous, and European people. US racial restrictions on Asian immigration, violent campaigns to drive out Chinese, and the Mexican Revolution, coupled with intensive infrastructure, water, and transportation investment, contributed to South Asian men and Mexican

women's marriages in Southern California, Arizona, and Texas and the resulting complexity of cross-cultural intimacy, religion, and child-rearing and gender roles.<sup>17</sup> Julia Camacho and Robert Chao Romero document parallel Chinese men's cross-border relationships with Mexican and Chicana women in Sonora, Chihuahua, Texas, Arizona, and California.<sup>18</sup>

Historian Peggy Pascoe has demonstrated how Asian men and women played pivotal roles in the proliferation of racial categories in antimiscegenation legal statutes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the court cases that began to decriminalize interracial marriage prohibitions in the mid-twentieth century. Legal contests and sensationalist news coverage of interracial courtship and marriage between White women and either Japanese or Filipino men inflamed political campaigns for legislative restrictions across the western and southern United States, but they also produced opportunities for a broader public to digest the possibilities of interracial attraction and desire, providing counternarratives of romance and female agency.<sup>19</sup>

The US federal government played a critical role in framing, diverting, and managing sexuality through regulating immigration, policing immorality, certifying marriages, and acknowledging kinship. Racialization and the sexualization of American normality were central to the emergence of US immigration gate-keeping. The immigration bureaucracy developed from the enforcement of the 1875 Page Law, which sexualized Chinese and Japanese women as potential prostitutes, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law, which offered class privileges for family reunification to Chinese merchants who, based on income and status, could invite their spouses and children to immigrate. The federal government enlisted Christian missionary movements, social reform organizations, and vice suppression groups to police and reform the sexuality of Chinese women. The role of the US government in legitimating marriage grew when the US and Japanese governments negotiated the dual-state legitimization of Japanese picture-bride arranged marriages, enabling Japanese family reunification. In the post-World War II period the US military and immigration service collaborated in the military bride program to enable the large-scale immigration of Japanese, Korean, and Filipina women who married US military men stationed at US bases in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.<sup>20</sup>

In the camps that the US government created to detain and incarcerate American citizens of Japanese descent and Japanese immigrants across the hemisphere, the crisis of dislocation, indefinite detention, and trauma, as well as the permeable social and economic relations among camp internees, camp workers, and the local surroundings, produced both homosocial and heterosocial subcultures of friendship and eroticism that were structured un-

der state surveillance and management. As John Howard and Tina Takemoto have demonstrated, race played an important role in both the officially facilitated state-sponsored courtship between interned Japanese American women and Japanese Hawaiian military recruits in Arkansas and Mississippi and the erotic encounters between Japanese American internees, as well as the permeable boundaries between internees and White camp workers and neighbors.<sup>21</sup>

The 1965 immigration act, with its lifting of race- and nation-based immigration quotas and its preference for multigenerational and lateral family reunification, transformed the sexual and kinship economy of Asian immigration in the United States. Through the mid-twentieth century the bachelor society and marriage brokerage gave way to the post-1965 policy, which featured greater ethnic diversity in Asian immigration and multigenerational family reunification. This immigration policy and history reinforced support for middle-class family formation through selection of higher-education students, professionals, and small family businesses. It also stratified heteronormativity in immigration gate-keeping.<sup>22</sup>

Biographical studies have offered unique case studies that demonstrate the complexities of navigating exoticism and experimentations with gender and sexual subjectivity and interracial romantic and friendship ties. Much of this scholarship also challenges the presumption that human erotic desires and activities can be neatly distinguished as either heterosexual or homosexual or that desires and acts are consistent and static over the course of a life. Judy Wu's biography of Margaret Chung examines the range of emotional ties and romantic possibilities among women and men and Chung's decision to create a social and kinship network outside of respectable marriage.<sup>23</sup> Wu's exemplary scholarship addresses early- to mid-twentieth-century experiences of gender variance and erotic relations and struggles to create and define kinship, households, and families of choice. The study explores the possibilities and limits of female sexual and economic autonomy that is not oriented toward male desire and heterosexual partnership. Amy Sueyoshi's recent biography of the poet Yone Noguchi emphasizes the mobility and complexity of race and national difference in erotic attraction and sexual desire over the course of a life in Noguchi's affairs with White men and women. The queer biography reveals the expression of private fantasies and frustrated intimacies, sexual relations that are in conflict with social and cultural norms.<sup>24</sup> Both biographical examinations offer an understanding of feeling, touching, and embodiments of gender variation. These studies also begin to address the tremendous gaps in historical scholarship in contextualizing how sex acts feel and what they mean. And perhaps even more specifically, they address how



we understand the affective and material ways in which bodies, imaginations, fantasies, desires, and dread connect, estrange, and divide people.

The affective complexity of race and sexuality that connects individuals to collective social movements is evidenced in the emergence of lesbian and gay identity, organization, and cultural and political expression. In the 1980s and 1990s ethnic identity and pan-Asian organizing emerged as a counterweight to concerns of marginalization and erasure by White-dominant lesbian, gay, and feminist organizations and movements. Both transnational ties and struggles with racial antipathy and attraction shaped the history of Asian American gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community and identity formation.<sup>25</sup> This is part of a broader process of attending to complex racial, linguistic, and national differences that continue to shape sexual identity, community, and alliance. New scholarship on transnational Asia and the Asian diaspora extends the mixture of ideas, concerns, and challenges in struggles over survival and recognition, over visibility and violence, as well as how people in different contexts have made dynamic efforts to forge community, express language and world views, and demand viability in a variety of social contexts.<sup>26</sup>

When *Intimate Matters* was published in 1988, D'Emilio and Freedman aimed at historicizing and challenging persistent and ahistorical binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality, female and male, and incorporating the social dynamics of class differences and racialization into the analytical narrative of the history of sexuality in the United States. European conquest, colonization, and slavery were part of the frame of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and shaped the sexual understandings of racial domination that contrasted White superiority with the sexual savagery, depravity, and perversion cast upon Indigenous peoples, Black slaves, and Chicano/as. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sexual regulation and sexual politics focused on the operation of a Black-White binary in state regulation and social movements. Immigrants were introduced to the narrative but were mostly peripheral players in the American saga of White and Black. New scholarship from the vantage point of Asian, Chicano/Latino, Arab, and Afro-Caribbean communities, subjects, and struggles was necessary to illuminate the complexity and the contradictory racialization of immigrants and to address the complex dynamics of multivalent associations, politics, and regulations through race and class stratification. It was also necessary for the emergence of historical scholarship that forthrightly tackled the dynamic roles of racial multiplication and for reordering in the regulation and criminalization of sexual intimacy; the state management of sex, gender, and kinship; the politics of sexual morality; and the emergence of new social solidarities, identities, subjectivities, and movements. At once this research specifies discrete racial



and ethnic identities that are actively enforced by the state, social power, and culture, but also alliances, intimacies, and cultural formations that defy racial and sexual boundaries. Asian American and Asian diaspora and transnational studies have transformed the ways in which we understand how racialized sexual meanings, identities, and practices travel and stratify. The scholarship offers some lines of flight that can illuminate the process by which peoples' lives become embroiled in and struggle against the formation of normativity and dominance in the relations of power by which differences in sexuality, gender, class, and race have congealed.

## NOTES

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